

Literature

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Illusion and Reality in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*

The basic vehicle of artistic representation by virtue of which Art functions and is perceived as Art is pretence, or to be more specific, *illusion of reality*. It can hardly be denied that any dramatic performance at variance with this principle is simply unthinkable.

It will not be debatable that there is only one reason for the property to be arranged on the stage: to stir the imagination of the audience and, thus, allow it to forget about the limitations of the house—at least for the time of the performance. Yet, there is no gainsaying it will not suffice for a play to be successful; what is necessary is a tacit consent to be “signed” between the actors and the spectators, according to which the former are supposed to playact while the latter are expected to let them hold sway from the moment the curtain rises. In short, permission to be “deluded” must be granted. Such is the mechanics of traditional drama, as we know it, or of what we call a “well-made play.”

Great theorists of modern drama have irrevocably repudiated traditional methods of staging. They have effected profound organic changes in the theatre itself. They have veered to experimentation which has ever since become an intrinsic part of productions by such great stage directors as Peter Brook, Tadeusz Kantor, Jerzy Grotowski, and the master of happenings, Allan Kaprow.

Ironically enough, even stage experimentation as a form of alternative drama has in the meantime established itself as a fixed tradition. In this regard its pioneers, Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936) and Thornton Wilder (1897–1975), whose plays are subject to analysis in this paper, can and should in all reason be referred to as *traditional* experimentalists.

Although there is a gap of twenty one years between the première of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) and the first public performance of *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), the manifold resemblances between these two pieces of drama are far from circumstantial. Accordingly, it will be assumed that both playwrights, Pirandello and Wilder, each in his own way, emphasized in their programmes the theatricality of a performance; questioned the main assumptions of the so-called well-made-play; aimed at destroying the perfect illusion of reality of conventional stage; examined various levels of interplay between Illusion and Reality; and programatically explored the inherent relationship between Life and Art.

Definition of the key terms

To clarify both the meaning and scope of the key terms as employed in the present analysis, it will be remembered that in its restricted sense (as confined to theatrical experience only) *illusion* is to be construed as *als ob* or a generation of pretences and verisimilitude in order to make the audience assume events happening in front of them as fact. On the other hand, *reality* should be defined entirely as the actuality of the stage (not to confuse with the external outdoor reality). Moreover, in a much broader sense, the opposition between the foregoing notions assumes the form of antinomy between Life and Art (in general) as formulated in the theories of both the playwrights. Likewise, the interplay between Illusion and Reality will be studied on both theatrical and philosophical planes.

What is a "theatre play"?

Inasmuch as they constantly emphasize the importance of their theatrical form, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* can be roughly described as "theatre plays." Both Pirandello and Wilder insist that their audience be reminded they are watching a play: the spectators are therefore brought face to face with scenic raw materials. In this respect the dramatists' views on the nature of the theatre seem to concur with that of John Gassner, a drama historian, who says that "there is never any sense in pretending that one is not in the theatre; that no amount of make-believe is reality itself;

that, in short, theatre is the medium of dramatic art, and the effectiveness in art consists in using the medium rather than concealing it" (Gassner 1956:141).

A device most preferable to materialize such a concept of drama is a "play in the making"¹ employed by both playwrights. In this regard, a performance in rehearsal can make it possible to present on the stage those contributors to the play who do not usually belong to it (a stage manager, ushers, stage hands, etc.). Such treatment is designed to highlight the realistic aspect of the theatrical production.

Compared with Wilder, Pirandello appears to exploit this device more directly. His play opens with a group of actors gathering to rehearse a play by a Pirandello. As the stage is not set yet, the audience is brought face to face with some carpenters and stage hands still at work. Before the Manager comes up, "the actors and actresses, some standing, some sitting, chat and smoke. One perhaps reads a paper; another cons his part" (*Six Characters...* p. 215).

As soon as the rehearsal starts, the actors are all of a sudden interrupted by the arrival of six characters who insist that they should have their life drama performed on the stage. The reason for their coming has already been stated in the very title of the play: "conceived" by an author who failed to write a dramatic piece, to which they could naturally belong, they are in search of an author to write "the book" of their life and make their existence fully justified.

The same treatment is applied in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. A group of ushers and dressers are supposed to stand in for the absent actors, unexpectedly taken ill. Mr. Fitzpatrick, a Stage Manager, is going to have a short rehearsal with them, in reference to which one of the characters intervenes:

Antrobus: Now this scene takes place near the end of this act. And I'm sorry to say we'll need a short rehearsal, just a short running through. And as some of it takes place in the auditorium, we'll have to keep the curtain up. Those of you who wish can go out in the lobby and smoke some more. The rest of you can listen to us, or ... or just talk quietly among yourselves, as you choose (p. 158).

¹ The notion as employed in the present analysis refers to the structure of the play, and is not to be confused with the phrase "the comedy in the making" (appearing at the beginning of the cast list in the English edition) which—as Eric Bentley suggests—is a mistranslation of the Italian "una commedia da fare" and should rather read "a play yet to be made" (1973:62).

In both plays breaking up the course of the performance was designed to look accidental and unintentional so as to create the impression that what follows is a piece of improvisation not included in the script. Needless to say, what apparently is to stand for the *reality* of the stage, revealing its mechanisms at work, is in actual fact the *illusion* of that reality.

The appearance of the six characters and the sudden sickness of the actors are not the only obstacles to hold back the plays, for it is also their Stage Managers who cut in several times to keep the performance going while the actors are openly expressing disapproval of the substance of the plays in which they are cast:

Leading Man: But it's ridiculous!

The Manager: Ridiculous? Ridiculous? Is it my fault if France won't send us any more good comedies, and we are reduced to putting on Pirandello's works where nobody understands anything, and where the author plays the fool with us all? (*Six Characters*... p. 216)

At the beginning of *The Skin of Our Teeth* Miss Somerset taking the part of Lily Sabina suddenly "flings pretence to the winds and coming downstage says with indignation":

I hate this play and every word in it... Besides the author hasn't made up his silly mind as to whether we're all living back in caves or in New Jersey today, and that's the way it is all the way through. Oh—why can't we have plays like we used to have [...] good entertainment with a message you can take home with you? (pp. 101–102)

Various levels of the interplay between illusion and reality

In the foregoing passages one can distinguish several different levels of the interplay between illusion and reality. One of them pertains to the structure of the play while the others refer to its characters and their feelings. Like the quotations previously discussed (the lines of the Stage Managers), all the present intrusions of the actors are not what they seem to be, that is to say, they are "illusory." They are related not to the play in progress (which in *reality* proceeds uninterrupted) but to the "play in the making." As regards the actors in "the play in the making," their sudden discontent is an inseparable part of "the book" and has nothing to do with the expression of their personal attitudes.

The third level of the interplay is a result of the application of similar devices by the both playwrights: they make their characters criticize their own works and praise the traditional play, the prin-

ciples of which they have undertaken to challenge. The interaction between what is actually stated (*illusion*) and what is really meant (*reality*) constitutes the substantial element of structural irony employed by the authors of the plays.

In uncovering the secrets of theatrical production Pirandello and Wilder continue to remind the audience that it is the stage itself which is the place of action of their own dramatic works. According to Eric Bentley, for instance, "what earned the Maestro [Pirandello] the highest compliments for originality was that... the boards of the theatre represent—the boards of the theatre. That is to say, they do not represent, they are. They are appearances which are the reality" (Bentley 1973:61).²

The distinction between the character and the actor

Pirandello and Wilder insist that the audience accept the fact that the theatre is—in its very essence—both illusory and real, because theatrical *illusion* and *reality* go hand in hand. As a rule, the audience readily give credence to the existence of even the most freakish character on the stage; yet, they never lose sight of the real man—an actor—who endows the character with life and his own personal characteristics.

Going a step further in their experimentation with the theatrical medium, both Pirandello and Wilder accentuate the distinction between characters and actors. In *Six Characters in Search of an Author* the division is stressed in the cast list by grouping all the *dramatis personae* into "characters of the comedy in the making" and "actors of the company," which is to be preserved throughout the play. As opposed to the living actors who, by theatrical means and their acting, create an illusion of reality for the audience, the six characters are entirely imaginary, "fantastic" and "have no other reality outside of this illusion" (p. 237). Accordingly, the main conflict in the play leading up to the clash between those two parties arises from the interplay between the *illusion of reality* (as performed by the actors) and the *reality of illusion* (as experienced by the characters).

What strikes the eye, while comparing *Six Characters in Search of an Author* with *The Skin of Our Teeth*, is that in the latter play the division into actors and characters is also of consequence, though it is not

² A similar opinion about Wilder's works was expressed by Donald Heiney (1974: 237): "Wilder always seen the stage as stage; theatre is not so much a slice of life as life is like the theatre."

entirely "mechanical." One *dramatis persona* in Wilder's play is intended to function at the same time both as a character (Lily Sabina) and an actor (Miss Somerset). The split into Man-the-Character and Man-the-Actor is noticeable whenever characters step out of their roles and present themselves merely as actors. Therefore the spectator finds out, for example, that Miss Somerset was forced to accept her part in the play since she had to earn her living, for, as we learn, "waiting for better times in the theatre" is no profitable business at all. Not only does she display her disillusionment, but even refuses to perform certain scenes from the play.

At first glance it seems apparent that Miss Somerset and "the actors of the company" (from Pirandello's play) represent theatrical reality. Actually, Miss Somerset is as "imaginary" as Lily Sabina, or "the characters of the comedy in the making," because both the actors (Leading Lady, Mr. Fitzpatrick, etc.) and the characters (The Father, Mr. Antrobus, etc.) are all the *dramatis personae* of the play performed in front of the audience.³

Another character who presents himself as an actor is Henry (*The Skin of Our Teeth*). The climactic dialogue between him and his father, Mr. Antrobus, happens to be interrupted by Miss Somerset who fears that Henry may really strangle his partner. That is how Henry—as the 'actor' who has stepped out of his role—accounts for his strange behaviour:

Henry: I'm sorry. I don't know what comes over me. I have nothing against him personally... But something comes over me. It's like I become fifteen years old again. I... I... listen: my own father used to whip me and lock me up every Saturday night. I never had enough to eat... My father and my uncle put rules in the way of everything I wanted to do. They tried to prevent my living at all—I'm sorry. I'm sorry (p. 171).

At this critical juncture the audience begins to feel confident that Henry-the-actor under the impact of some painful memories from his boyhood transfers his hatred to and desires to avenge himself on his fictional father, Mr. Antrobus. The scene in question appears to be crucial for the *illusion* versus *reality* interplay. Henry's own reminiscences from the past commingle with his illusory theatrical experience,

³ Raymond Williams elucidates this point in his comment on *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, which also holds good of *The Skin of Our Teeth*: "The contrast is not between artifice and reality, but between two levels of artifice. The characters, that is to say, cannot represent a reality against which the artificiality of the theatre may be measured; they are themselves products of the theatrical method" (1983:181).

and, as a result, the pretended attempt on Antrobus' life assumes the form of an actual act of violence. Travis Bogard comments on the scene in the following way: "When Cain's murderous frenzy becomes the actor's reality, when the artificial enactment of a symbolic gesture becomes the particular actor's truth, illusion and reality merge" (1965:368).

However, the moment the audience are beginning to see Henry's point and feel capable of distinguishing between what is *real* and what is *illusory*, Sabina hastens to rectify his words.

Sabina: That's not true. I knew your father and your uncle and your mother. You imagined all that. Why, they did everything they could for you. How can you say things like that? They didn't lock you up (*The Skin of Our Teeth*, p. 172).

Now the spectators come to realize that what they have so far considered a reality (Henry-the-actor's childhood) once again turns out to be a sort of illusion of that reality which Henry creates about himself. This perspective, perpetually angled, makes it sometimes almost impossible for the confused audience to detect whether the lines belong to the actors or to the characters they perform: this is where the borderline between *illusion* and *reality* as good as disappears.

A similar kind of perplexity is to be found in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, where, at the close of the play, the Actors are confronted with a scene enacted by the six newcomers, in which the Boy is shown to have shot himself with a revolver.

The Manager (*pushing the Actors aside while they lift up the Boy and carry him off*): Is he really wounded?

Some Actors: He's dead! dead!

Other Actors: No, no, it's only make believe, it's only pretence!

The Father (*with a terrible cry*): Pretence? Reality, sir, reality! (p. 242).

Reality versus illusion on the theatrical plane: conclusions

When examining the interplay between *reality* and *illusion* on the theatrical plane, one can hardly fail to discern the "interpenetration" of the real and the illusory. The special effect seems to have been accomplished by the application of "the play in the making" device which determines the structure of the plays as well as the construction of the *dramatis personae*. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the interplay between *illusion* and *reality* on two separate levels: 1) that of an actual performance, and 2) that of the play in the making. It does not

imply, however, that these two levels are mutually exclusive, since each of them makes up the integral part of the other. And so, the physical stage functions as the place of action for the play in the making, whereas the incidental interruptions of the continuity of the latter mark the endings of the successive acts of the actual performance.⁴

Needless to say, the introduction of the new dimension of double illusion has established new relations between the *dramatis personae* in the plays. In the play proper the distinction between actors and characters seems obvious: the audience gathered in the auditorium see the actors (*reality*) perform their roles of characters (*illusion*) on the stage. And the same time, however, it happens that all the characters of the two plays are either actors or characters of the play in the making—both equally illusory as opposed to the living actors.

In *The Skin of Our Teeth* "the effect is a little like the infinity to be found in barbershop mirrors: Lilith, the eternal temptress, is a maid named Sabina, who is played by an actress named Miss Fairweather, who in turn was played by an actress named Tallulah Bankhead" (Bogard 1965:367).

Such an original handling (manipulation?) of the theatrical medium whose goal is to expose and highlight these aspects of the stage production, which traditional presentation *does* conceal, requires a new kind of audience. Unlike the 19th-century theatre-goers who "fashioned a theatre which could not disturb them,"⁵ the new breed of spectators are not expected to watch the modern plays passively, but conversely, they are to respond to everything that is spoken and done on the boards, for as Wilder explains in his essay "Some Thoughts on Playwriting," drama is a "collaborative effort shared by the playwright, the actors, and the playgoers who sit 'shoulder to shoulder' as the play unfolds" (Goldstein 1965:116).

The spectator, as an organic constituent of a theatrical production, is drawn into participation in the performance. In the *Skin of Our Teeth*,

⁴ It holds true of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* which is meant to be "the comedy without acts or scenes." In actual fact the play in the making is interrupted twice: for the first time when "the manager and the chief characters withdraw to arrange the scenario" (the break marks the end of the first act of the actual performance), and later, when "by mistake the stage hands let the curtain down" (the end of the second act).

⁵ Cf. Preface to *Three Plays* (pp. 8–10) and Wilder's critical view of the 19th-century traditional drama which attempted to suit the tastes of the middle class audience.

for example, Sabina addresses the audience directly and once even stimulates them into action:⁶

Sabina (*after placing wood on the fireplace comes down to the footlights and addresses the audience*): Will you please start handing up your chairs? We'll need everything for this fire. Save the human race. — Ushers, will you pass the chairs up here? Thank you (p. 126).

As regards *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, although the spectators are not expected to display any sign of activity, the role of the responsive audience is taken over by the group of actors who are watching the play-within-the-play performed by the characters: when the latter are beginning to speak in an unintelligible manner, the former break in to disapprove:

Leading Man: What does she say?

Leading Lady: One can't hear a word.

Juvenile Lead: Louder! Louder please! (p. 231).

Reality versus illusion on the philosophical plane

The confrontation between the actors (brought down to the role of an audience) and the characters (anxious to take the part of actors) forms the main conflict in the play, defined by Pirandello himself as "the inherent tragic conflict between Life (which is always moving and changing) and form (which fixes it immutable)."⁷ This statement definitely stresses one aspect of the opposition between Life and Art, that is to say, the mutability of life in the realm of time versus the immutability of form in the realm of art.

Apparently, it is not at all difficult to determine who is who in the play. The characters (fantastic creations existing only in the author's imagination) represent Art as opposed to real, living actors intended to symbolize Life. At the same time, however, the characters—who gradually become so independent of their creator that they declare they are willing to live on their own and present their family drama on the stage *themselves*—signify the immediacy of experience, a characteristic of

⁶ Some other examples of Sabina addressing people gathered in the auditorium are to be found at the beginning and in the middle of the first act: "Now that you audience are listening to this, too, I understand it a little better" (p. 105); "Ladies and gentlemen! Don't take this play serious" (p. 117).

⁷ Cf. Pirandello 1952: 245.

The juxtaposition of these two contrastive perspectives allows for concluding that, as regards Pirandello's concept of drama, no actor is in a position to impersonate any character because individual experience cannot be shared. Although it is possible to repeat words and imitate gestures, no one is able to enter a *dramatis persona's* mind or feel what he/she is feeling at a given moment. The only thing an actor can venture to do is, indeed, try to interpret the character's experience (Life) by virtue of his acting (Art). Yet, by creating an illusion of reality with the aid of manifold theatrical conventions, he destroys at the same time the illusory reality of the characters.

The gap between the actor and the character becomes more and more "unbridgable" by the fact that—as the Father himself puts it—unlike living men "he who has had the luck to be born a character can laugh even at death. He can not die" (p. 218). The point is expanded in the argument between the Father and the Stage Manager, where the former maintains that the characters are truer and more *real* than the actors:

The Father: Ours is an immutable reality which should make you shudder when you approach us if you are really conscious of the fact that your reality is a mere transitory and fleeting illusion, taking this form today and that tomorrow (p. 238).

However, one cannot help feeling that the immutability of the characters' reality (seemingly superior to the aging bodies and uncertain future of the actors) proves to be their curse. They are doomed to go on repeating the same harrowing and embarrassing scenes from their family life over and over again, as they can do nothing to escape their destiny and torment.

This view is also shared by Jørn Møstrup who comments on the inevitability of the six characters' lot as exemplified by the Son: "The Son resists the father's and daughter's plans of having their story turned into a play, and this is a psychological detail which is used to characterize him in relationship to the others. He is a closed and reticent nature, and he does not wish to participate together with the three other children, whom he considers to be intruders. But this modest descriptive detail takes on a special significance because it emphasizes the necessity of their situation. He cannot avoid participating; he came along against his will, and against his will he must act his part to the bitter end and share defeat with the others" (1973, 192).

Life. In contrast, the actors trying to imitate characters stand for the theatre or Art. The following inference complies with Eric Bentley's interpretation of the main source of discord in the play, namely the difference between living and rehearsing a scene: "We see a central group of people who are 'real.' They suffer, and need help, not analysis. Around these are grouped unreal busybodies who can only look on, criticize and hinder" (1987:182).

As the characters go through traumatic scenes from their life in front of the actors, the Stage Manager continues to remind them of the limitations of the theatrical staging:

Stage Manager: On the stage you can't have a character becoming too prominent and overshadowing all the others. The thing is to pack them all into a neat little framework and then act what is actable (*Six Characters...* p. 235).

As the members of the theatrical company contend, the embarrassment with which the characters are re-living their personal tragedies, and also their insistence on having the scenery reconstructed with meticulous care, are out of line with any of the widely accepted theatrical conventions. On the other hand, the characters are never content with the way the actors perform their (the characters') parts. The stage directions say:

The rendering of the scene by the actors from the very first words seem to be quite a different thing, though it has not in any way the air of parody. Naturally, the Stepdaughter and the Father not being able to recognize themselves in the Leading Lady and the Leading Man, who deliver their words in different tones and with a different psychology, express, sometimes with smiles, sometimes with gestures, the impression they receive (*Six Characters...* p. 233).

What we realize in the course of the play is that the reality of the theatre (which is only an illusion) and a dramatic illusion (which is the characters' reality) come to form irreconcilable antinomies. The task of the company is clearly defined by the Stage Manager ("Acting is our business here. Truth up to a certain point, no further" — p. 234), while the point of view of the characters is presented by the Mother who vehemently reacts to what has happened on the boards:

The Mother: I can't bear it. I can't.

The Manager: But since it has happened already... I don't understand!

The Mother: It's taking place now. It happens all the time. My torment isn't

Cyclical forms of the plays

The deterministic view of the characters' lives creates an air of fatality and pessimism throughout the play. The double failure of the characters to understand each other, and of the actors to understand the characters, is reflected in the cyclical form of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*: from the Manager's last words the audience are bound to infer that the moment curtain rises again he will try to go on with the interrupted rehearsal, which brings the spectator back to square one. This aura of despondency mounts with a scene of the Manager complaining about the wasted time, from which can be concluded that he has not taken a lesson from this strange encounter.

The same kind of cyclical form has been adopted in *The Skin of Our Teeth*; likewise, its action runs back to its start. This time, however, the last act ends with the opening scene of the play, namely, Sabina repeating her opening lines and addressing the audience with a short epilogue:⁸

Sabina (*she comes to the footlights*): This is where you came in. We have to go on for ages and ages yet (p. 178).

The notion of a cyclical recurrence of things, as employed in the play, is redolent of the theories of Giambattista Vico, an 18th-century Neapolitan thinker, according to whom all nations and civilizations must pass through the subsequent stages of growth, decline and fall, and again regrowth. This process of cultural and civilizational development parallels, to some extent, a child's acquisition of knowledge through broadening experience.

It seems that Wilder (as opposed to Pirandello who dwells basically upon the notion of Art and the existence of artistic creations) focuses his attention on the value of human endeavours and Life and its requisite, Vitality. Therefore in *The Skin of Our Teeth* the experience of an individual merges with that of the whole race: a striking effect produced by Wilder's ingenuity in manipulating time. Namely, the playwright sets

⁸ The notion of the inevitability of human destiny is additionally stressed in Sabina's violent monologue in the middle of the third act: "That's all we do—always beginning again! Over and over again... Some day the whole earth's going to have to turn cold anyway, and until that time all these other things'll be happening again: it will be more wars and more walls of ice and floods and earthquakes" (*The Skin of Our Teeth*, p. 167).

together the geological time of the Ice Age in the first act with the biblical time of Noah's flood in the second and the time of World War II in the third act of the play. As the time of action encompasses both the prehistoric past and the present (the play was written—as Wilder himself points out—“on the eve of our entrance into the war”)⁹ characters naturally represent contemporary Americans, cavemen, etc., in general, human types, “everymen,” whose conduct reflects the universal experience of humanity.¹⁰

Accordingly, it can be concluded that this primordial experience of the race shared by all human beings, the Jungian “collective unconscious,” is the key to the proper understanding of the play and, especially, of the climactic scene in which Henry is trying to strangle Mr. Antrobus. It explains why Henry-the-actor confuses the reality with the theatrical illusion: he cannot help identifying himself entirely with Henry-the-character, even though his individual experience is not identical. Besides Mr. Antrobus-the-actor himself admits that his own way of acting must have “prompted” Henry to take such a radical and inexplicable course of action:

Antrobus: It's not wholly his fault that he wants to strangle me in this scene. It's my fault too. He wouldn't feel that way unless there were something in me that reminded him of all that (*The Skin of Our Teeth*, p. 172).

It will possibly be agreed that this “something” might be typified as the potentiality of each and every actor to identify himself with each and every character, the source of which is the archetypal experience they *do* share.

If we compare the actor-character relationship in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* with that of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, we may be able to find that Pirandello and Wilder considerably differ in opinions on that point. For the former, the actor is incapable of identifying himself with the character (hence, the splitting of the cast list into two separate groups). For the latter, on the contrary, the actor is able to impersonate any character whatsoever (as has been proved in the Henry—Mr. Antrobus climactic scene).

⁹ Cf. Wilder 1984: 13.

¹⁰ Rex Burbank suggests that Mr. Antrobus is the middle class American, Adam, and the “father pilot” of the human race at the same time; his wife is the American mother, but also Eve and a symbol of eternity, etc. (1961: 105–106).

The relationship between Life and Art

It can be inferred that the difference in treating the actor-character relationship by the two playwrights originates from their opposing conceptions of the relationship between Life and Art. As has already been stated, for Pirandello art is both timeless and unalterable:

Hence, always, as we open the book, we shall find Francesca alive and confessing to Dante her sweet sin, and if we turn to the passage a hundred thousand times in succession, Francesca will speak her words, never repeating them mechanically, but saying them as though each time were the first time with such living and sudden passion that Dante every time will turn faint. All that lives, by the fact of living, has a form, and by the same token must die—except the work of art which lives for ever in so far as *it is* form (Pirandello 1952: 248).

For that reason, Art is not an appropriate means to reflect changing and transitory processes of Life. Whenever a "piece" of life has been arrested in artistic form, it becomes eternal, although it is bound to lose its fluidity. In this respect—as Susan Bassnett avers—"Art is a kind of death, since it freezes and fixes the unfixable" (1983:26).

For Wilder it is quite the contrary. The analysis of his play proves that both its form and content are designed to demonstrate that it is Life that possesses the quality of timelessness; Life, not as an individual being, but as a process or force which carries mankind through the times of woe. This triumph of Life is hinted at in the very title of the play, for—as M. Goldstein observes—"no matter how hard pressed or frightened, the human race has power to survive its great adventure in the world where physical nature and its own internal conflicts pose endless threats" (1965:118).

As a result of definite universal human needs and nature, all efforts aimed at avoiding extinction are common to men of all epochs and cultures. For this reason, Wilder introduces various mythological figures and presents a mixture of philosophical trends.¹¹

In consequence, the cyclical form of the play reflects not only the recurrent disasters that threaten human race with annihilation, but also Man's propensity to commit the same mistakes time and again. Optimistically enough, the idea of progress has not been entirely denied: the posterity will still have a chance to learn a lesson from the errors of their ancestors:

¹¹ Cf. Burbank 1961: 110.

Antrobus: All I ask is the chance to build new worlds and God has always given us that. And has given us (*opening the book*) voices to guide us; and the memory of our mistakes to warn us... We've come a long way. We've learned. We're learning. And the steps of our journey are marked for us here (*he stands by the table turning the leaves of a book*) (*The Skin of Our Teeth*, p. 176).

Antrobus in his monologue defines the function of art as reflection and record of human activities. Art is timeless and universal *only* because Life it imitates possesses those qualities. As the process of living has no end, the play which is to translate it into the language of Art has no finite form either. At the very end of the last act Sabina bids the audience goodbye, saying: "You go home. The end of this play isn't written yet." This is the way the play comes to a halt: no ending, no denouement, no *catharsis*.

Concluding reflections

The manipulation of theatricality in Pirandello's and Wilder's plays (the final goal of which is to obliterate the line between *illusion* and *reality*) appears to be nothing but the sleight of hand of a conjurer's who has invited a spectator to take part in his show. The latter is basically aware that all he bears witness to amounts to the former's dexterity; yet, what he sees is beyond his ken. Therefore he can hardly deny it is magic.

The relativity of events on the stage makes it impossible for the spectator to treat the play as pure entertainment. The play ceases to be a *play*; it turns into a sort of *game* whose rules he is trying to learn in the course of the performance; the spectator is no longer a passive recipient: he should commit himself. The theatre has thus become a "happening" reality to which he is expected to conform. This new experience of his goes beyond his aesthetic experience. This is where Art converges on Life.

Pirandello's and Wilder's attempts at experimentation have finally paved the road to the experimentalist theatre of today in which plot has become a set of images and events; action has turned into activity, roles into tasks; themes have given way to no pre-set meaning; scripts have been replaced by scenarios or free forms: where product has become a *process*. The new concept of the theatre has ever since become "the play in the making."

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